

Oral history of telephone operator, Phillis Witteveen, in 1956 Holland, Michigan and then 1957 in Houghton, Michigan.

*[interview by VoIP telephone on November 12, 2025]*

The supervisors and operators were all women. The 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. shift were paid a higher rate, even though fewer calls were serviced then, due to the small number of women willing or able to work then. In all telephone offices there would be a small kitchen with a big pot of coffee constantly ready to caffeinate workers who started to feel drowsy. In Holland the equipment and procedures were more advanced than more rural towns, like in Houghton in the far north of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. She had completed all course credits to graduate from Holland high school early, but by law was required to attend. So the school allowed her to leave after lunch and work at the phone company, where her cousin had a job and recommended her. These were the days before rotary dial phones in homes and businesses. A caller simply lifted the phone off its cradle to light up a spot on the telephone operator's vertical board of local numbers. The operator would plug into the lighted socket and begin by saying, "What number, please"? Sometimes phones at up to 16 different addresses shared the same 3 or 4 digit phone number. So the caller had to specify which household they wished to speak to. Among the houses and businesses on these "party lines" each location had its own signature ringing pattern; for example, two short rings and one long. But someone else might be 3 short rings. Since all parties sharing the same phone number were attached, technically a nosy neighbor could eavesdrop on the call. But if the operator listened, the supervisor would tap the operator on the shoulder as a mild scold.

Special cases included emergencies - then the operator asked "address, please" before contacting the police or fire or ambulance service. As for ringing somebody outside of the local telephone exchange office, the operator had to initiate a connection to the outside operator for the final connection. In the case of "collect calls," when the caller requested the person receiving the call to accept the cost of the (long distance) phone call, it was up to the operator to speak to the person being asked to pay. If that person agreed to pay for the phone call appearing on their monthly bill, then the operator connected the callers. But in the event of declined calls, then the operator would inform the caller of that outcome. As for public pay-phones, we did not discuss how long-distance or extended charges were handled in those early days. Crank calls were not possible, since everyone knew the caller and recipient numbers.

A more informal dimension of telephone operators in those days was that a caller could pick up the receiver (the handset containing microphone and the part nearest to the ear) and ask to speak to one of the operators personally; for example, a friend or family member. And with the employment options for women much more restricted than later generations, the fact that the telephone operators in both of these cities in Michigan belonged to a labor union meant that wages were above average.

Gradually, in the cities and then the countryside of the 1960s and 1970s the residential and business telephone service gradually changed. Even though she was not working for the telephone company after 1960 or 1961, some of the innovations that come to mind are being able to dial a telephone number directly (no operator involved) so long as the "dial tone" indicated the phone was functioning and the line was not being used by anybody else. Then people sometimes paid for additional phones so that more than one person could join a conversation, and so that it would be easier to reach the device in the night or in a large building. Optional long telephone cords allowed a person to pull the handset into a nextdoor room. Some (rotary) dial phones had an option flashing light to substitute for the ringing bell so that others would not be disturbed by an incoming call. Businesses and office might have more than one number for callers to contact. Or the multiple rooms in a company could be assigned extension numbers for a receptionist to transfer incoming calls to the right person.

The appearance of touch-tone phones seemed futuristic at one time; no need to dial a set of numbers and patiently wait for the rotating dial to spin back to its starting point. Then came wireless, "cordless" phones with a short range antenna from the base station to the handset, allowing a person to roam for 20 or maybe 30 feet from the telephone jack of the base station. Later on telephone answering machines began to appear when people could

not or did not wish to answer the phone call. Combination fax/telephone machines were still another innovation so that facsimile (fax) documents of text and images could be transmitted. As well, people began to dial long-distance (and later also international) numbers without the aid of the telephone operators.

Now that personal phone numbers (sometimes multiple numbers per person) seem to be attached to anybody over the age of 8 or 10-years-old, it is hard to remember the analog days before Internet and fiber-optic cables, wireless transmission, and rotary phones, or the non-dial system of speaking to a telephone operator..